God and the Meanings of Life: What God Could and Couldn't Do to Make Our Lives More Meaningful, by T. J. Mawson. Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. 229. $29.95 (paperback).

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If I were asked to recommend a book about what people commonly refer to as "the meaning of life," *God and the Meanings of Life* would be it. In addition to being clearly written and eminently readable, it does a masterful job of providing a broad overview of the contemporary literature on the topic. But this is not to say that the views Mawson defends are representative of the mainstream in the literature on the meaning of life. Much of the book is a sustained argument against the conventional position that "What is the meaning of life?" is one question that has one answer. Mawson maintains it is many questions with many answers. Moreover, also out of step with most treatments of the meaning of life is Mawson's claim that God's existence is relevant to the deepest understandings of life's meaning. So while his book is an engaging way into thought about the meaning of life, it is a way that informs readers that most people writing on the topic are fundamentally mistaken. In what follows, I summarize some of the main points of the book, and then interact critically with a couple of issues raised in it.

Mawson calls himself a "polyvalent amalgamist" about the meaning of life question. What is a polyvalent amalgamist, besides a mouthful? It is someone who believes the question "What is the meaning of life?" is ambiguous. In one of the clearest statements of his view, Mawson writes "polyvalence at the level of connotation is the thesis that there are a number of different legitimate meanings of 'meaning' and 'life' in the question of life's meaning. When one asks the question 'What is the meaning of life?' one thus asks a number of different questions at once. And polyvalence at the level of denotation is the thesis that these different questions have different answers" (15). "[W]hen we see the different meanings of the question 'What is the meaning of life?' we can see instantly that some of them just must—of conceptual necessity—have different answers from others" (50). So "[n]o one thing can be *the* meaning of life" (49).

Part of what motivates Mawson's opposition to the "monovalent" view of the meaning of life question is the sense of dissatisfaction that one typically has upon receiving an answer, where this is often expressed by something like "There must be more to it than that" (23). There must be more to it than that because there are many meanings of life corresponding to the many different questions being asked with "What is the meaning of life?"

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One reason for thinking there are many different questions is that there are many different meanings of the words "life" and "meaning." Consider "life." There is biological life, and one might be asking "Why is the world one with life in it, rather than entirely dead?" (51). Or one might mean by "life" all that exists or "everything," so that "What is the meaning of life?" means "What's the meaning of it all?" (52). Furthermore, one might mean by life "human life," so that one is asking "Why are humans here?" when one queries about the meaning of life (57). Yet again, one might take "life" to mean "my individual life," and be asking "Why am I here?" (57). Mawson thinks it is evident that whereas one might believe that life in the sense of human life is meaningless because it is a product of blind, purposeless causes, at the same time one might think one's individual life is meaningful because one can as an individual either make something of it (57–58) or have a "feeling of fulfilment with some aspect of one's life" (60).

What about different senses of "meaning"? Mawson usefully contrasts meaning as mere causal consequence as opposed to meaning as causally producing something significant or deeper (64), where one meaning is deeper than another if it is more desirable (17). While meaning as mere causal consequence is a necessary condition of more significant meaning, few, if any, of us care at all for meaning as mere causal consequence. Consider, here, Andy, Bob, and Charlie. Andy has been rolling rocks to the top of a hill and stacking them into a pile there for eternity past and, by hypothesis, for eternity future. Bob is in the same situation temporally as Andy, but instead of piling his rocks, he uses them to construct an increasingly beautiful, but never completed, building. Finally, Charlie has been rolling rocks for a Bob-like task for a finite period of time. What we learn from this example is that we regard Charlie's life as more meaningful than Andy's, even though the mere causal consequences of his actions are quantitatively less than those of Andy. Thus, we do not value meaning as causal consequence for its own sake but only for its being a necessary condition of meaning as a positively evaluable causal consequence (63–64).

Mawson goes on to point out that one might also consider the question as a whole and ask competent language users how they understand it. Not surprisingly, there are multiple interpretations of the question. One might be asking whether there are any positively evaluable consequences of one's life as a whole; whether any purposes are served by one's life; whether one's life stands for anything; whether there is anything that makes life worth living; and on and on (67).

To sum up things to this point, Mawson believes his "part-whole" approach to "What is the meaning of life?" is the best evidence for the polyvalent amalgamist view (68). The problem "is not that the question of the meaning of life has too little meaning [or is 'nonsense masquerading as profundity']; it has too much" (71). But if "What is the meaning of life?" is so rich in interpretive content, can any interpretation of the question about life's meaning qualify as a legitimate interpretation? Mawson believes not, principally for two reasons. First, logically incoherent interpretations are

illegitimate, since what is logically incoherent means nothing, and what means nothing cannot be a meaningful interpretation of our question (78). Second, a proffered interpretation must address *our* concern in asking the question. "We . . . are sovereign over the identity of [the] question" (81). Hence, someone who answers "Life is a fountain" or "42" has not understood a concern of ours when we ask about life's meaning (80–81). Someone who answers "It's to make money" understands a concern of ours (what is the purpose of our lives?), but this individual has given a false answer (79–80).

The polyvalence thesis recognizes that there are multiple interpretations of "What is the meaning of life?" Given these many interpretations, Mawson believes there is a hierarchy of higher and lower senses of meaningfulness: the higher a sense of meaningfulness on the list, the more deeply we are concerned about it. Mawson believes "it is our individual lives that are the main focus of our concerns when we ask 'What is the meaning of life?'" (60). It is thus higher on the list than interpretations that concentrate on life in broader senses. Moreover, the different senses of "the meaning of life" which are concerned with us as individuals are connected. They cluster or cohere together in certain ways, so that a grab-bag approach is false and the amalgam thesis is true (85–97). Principles of clustering include logical implication (e.g., "where an individual's life having meaning in sense *a* strictly implies that it has meaning in sense *b*" [98]). But not only do different sorts of meaning amalgamate in certain ways, so also do instances of the same kind of meaningfulness. For example, if every moment of a person's life seems to be meaningful to him in the sense that life seems to be worth going on, then that individual's life as a whole is meaningful in the same sense. In this instance, there is no fallacy of composition (107).

Given polyvalence, and sticking with the idea of life as one's own individual life, the possibility arises that not all of the many understandings of the meaning of life can be satisfied. Mawson's go-to example pits "What is the meaning of life?" understood as "What is the purpose of my life?," where it is answered in terms of a purpose of life bestowed by God (1) that is actually achieved (9), against meaningfulness as Sartrean dignity, which is explained in terms of self-creative autonomy (111). With divinely-bestowed purpose, one can add meaningfulness to one's life by "appropriating to oneself the purposes that God has given one," where a God-given purpose "adds to [meaningfulness] in the sense of allowing one to see aspects of one's life as fulfilling a part in some appropriate larger scheme of things. And it adds to it in the sense of allowing one to find a meaningfulness for oneself in these purposes, and . . . to feel a certain sort of satisfaction from fulfilling these purposes" (132). Mawson makes clear that Sartrean dignity is not in conflict with having a God-imposed purpose because the latter is not in itself, as some have claimed, degrading. God's purpose, even though not degrading and, indeed, life-enhancing, conflicts with Sartrean dignity because it limits our self-creative autonomy

(116–120). "Sartre's view then seems to be that we can have meaning in our lives, but only to the extent that we put it in ourselves. If there had been a God 'putting it in for us', that would have detracted from our ability to put it in ourselves. The more meaning [purpose] prescribed [for us] by God, the less meaning unconstrainedly chosen by us, and thus the less meaning for us [even if there is more meaning for God]" (1). So "these two sorts of meaningfulness [are] . . . related conceptually to one another such that one can only have one to the extent that one lacks the other" (129). Therefore, even if some meanings of life amalgamate, not all do so.

Mawson's solution to a resultant "one-can't-have-it-all" problem is to make clear that some meanings of life are more valuable than others. The result is that while "there could be meaning in our world even were it a Godless world, there could be more and deeper sorts of meaning in it were it a Godly one" (17). God, in Mawson's view, "ends up bringing more to the party (or, if you will, afterparty) . . . than He takes away . . . through giving us eternal life," because heavenly eternal life, whose existence is affirmed by theism but denied by atheism (139), "keeps the meanings of life we have *ante-mortem* going; going infinitely; and going infinitely *for us*" (17). This quantitative point (141) is most significant for us because we desire that *we* enjoy a maximally desirable existence that is everlasting (153–154). "In short, while life is meaningful in many senses—and many deep senses—regardless of what, if anything, happens to us after death, in giving us [having us experience] the right sort of immortality—Heaven [which is a maximally desirable *post-mortem* existence]—God makes our lives as finite *ante-mortem* plus potentially *post-mortem* wholes more meaningful overall (than our lives would have been had they simply been our finite *ante-mortem* lives)" (141). But there is also a qualitative issue involved concerning meanings of life. Significance meaning is that which involves the bringing about of significant positively evaluable consequences (148). Given *post-mortem* existence of the kind just described, God provides for us ultimate significance meaning (149). Mawson believes ultimate significance meaning is a deeper (qualitatively better) form of meaning than Sartrean self-creative autonomy. He concludes that "insofar as I try just to think clear-headedly of the values that feature on the chart/list of the meanings of life and choose by reference to those so as to make my existence as overall meaningful as possible, I retain a relatively high degree of confidence that I'd be choosing correctly if I chose immortality. I think Sartre would choose mortality" (155). Mawson acknowledges he would make his choice, while fully recognizing that given God's existence "it's metaphysically impossible for any of us to have fully meaningful lives in the Sartrean sense and that is, in itself, bad for us" (122). He concludes that at this point he fears "we may be down to a temperamental difference again, that in this argument we have reached bedrock and our spade is turned" (155).

Like Mawson, I am a theistic polyvalent amalgamist, though I didn't have "polyvalent amalgamist" in my limited vocabulary until I read

Mawson's book. In concluding this review, I first share some thoughts about what atheists and agnostics often give as a response to theistic views of the meaning of life. I then explain one issue on which I part ways with Mawson.

When Mawson appeals to the idea of the heavenly afterlife as the "more" which God brings to the meaning of life, he is invoking a variant of an idea now commonly referred to in the philosophical literature on life's meaning as the "perfection thesis." The perfection thesis is often regarded as the claim that a final perfect existence is required for meaning in an individual's life. However, Mawson states clearly at several points in his book that he believes there can be meaning in one form or another in an individual's life, even if death brings a permanent end to a person's existence. What Mawson believes, and I think reasonably so, is that if there is no final perfect existence in the form of perfect happiness, the beatific vision, etc., then an individual's life is *ultimately* meaningless/absurd. Why is he convinced this is the case? If I understand him correctly, it is because this kind of final existence, which is quantitatively and qualitatively the deepest form of meaning, is what we desire. And if this desire is not fulfilled, then life in the end is meaningless. Thus, it is the idea of desire and its fulfillment that informs Mawson's claim that God brings more to the table than atheism when it comes to the meaning of life.

An atheist might respond that he or she doesn't have the desire for this kind of perfect existence. While Mawson concedes this response might reflect a matter of temperament, in fact he finds it hard to believe: "How could a maximally desirable existence not be one that it was desirable to continue?" (142). Perhaps it is because it is hard to answer this question that many argue that death is needed to make life meaningful. For example, some claim we would have no reason to do something today, if we could always put it off until tomorrow. Mawson quotes Victor Frankl's claim that "[i]f we were immortal, we could legitimately postpone every action forever. . . . But in the face of death as absolute *finis* . . . we are under the imperative of utilizing our lifetimes to the utmost" (182n47). As Mawson points out, this gets things backwards: "Things that are inherently worth doing are things one is prima facie reasonable in doing now just in virtue of that inherent worth. One needs countervailing reason to *delay* doing them, not reason (beyond their inherent worth) for doing them" (182n47).

I think Mawson's response to Frankl is basically correct. Rather than needing a reason to do today what could be done tomorrow or the next day, once we recognize something that is intrinsically good, we need some reason to delay the pursuit of it. Mawson seems to believe the primary locus of this inherent worth is action. This leads to my second point, which constitutes a disagreement between Mawson and me. Unlike Mawson, I believe the primary locus of inherent worth is passion, not action. I believe this because I believe the primary intrinsic good is the experience of pleasure. Hence, it is for the experience of pleasure that we first and foremost

need a reason to delay. Because this is part of my temperament, I find it hard to agree with Mawson and Sartre about the value of self-creative autonomy. Mawson writes that "Sartrean meaningfulness" is "a sense of meaningfulness that in and of itself we rightly value" (123). However, I do not regard self-creative autonomy as an intrinsic good. It seems to me to have no more than instrumental value. This is because what I ultimately value is perfect happiness, and I think of it as experiences of nothing but pleasure (disclosure: while I am not a hedonist, I am a hedonist about happiness). Thus, were I to be perfectly happy, I would not care the least about possessing self-creative autonomy or free will. I value having free will and, by implication, self-creative autonomy only to the extent that it provides me with good reason to think and hope that I might be able to do something to remove myself from a situation in life that is less than appealing. But perfect happiness could never be to any degree unappealing. Moreover, it is because I think of perfect happiness as the experience of nothing but pleasure that I am unpersuaded by the objection (standardly traced to Bernard Williams) that eternal bliss would become boring. How could the experience of pleasure be boring? Mawson also finds the "boredom" objection wanting: "And surely worshipping God in the full glory of the beatific vision would not be boredom-worthy" (141). Absolutely so. But I believe it is the pleasurable nature of that vision that makes clear why it could not be boring.

It is because I part ways with Mawson (and Sartre) about the value of self-creative autonomy that I in the end part ways with his polyvalent amalgamist view that not all of the deeply valuable meanings of life are jointly satisfiable. I believe that not having meaning in the Sartrean sense in the heavenly end that is perfect happiness would not in any respect be bad for us. What would be bad for us is my failing to commend once again Mawson's book. It is the gold standard among works on the meaning of life.

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Kierkegaard's God and the Good Life presents recent work on love, faith, responsibility, and well-being in Kierkegaard. Several of the essays engage somewhat unusual topics in the context of Kierkegaardian ethics, including early Christianity (Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria), Google,

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